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Vitality Assessment of a Sino-Tibetan Language Based on the State of Art Field Report in Pumi Community of Yunnan, China

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, language endangerment has become a globally important problem. According to *the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, at present, there are 577 endangered languages in the world. China, as a multi-ethnic country with 56 nationalities, also faces this threat.

The Pumi language, as one of the Sino-Tibetan languages, is a China's minority language with small population speakers. It mainly distributed in Yunnan Providence, China, and is currently in danger of being extinct (Hong-kai, 2006). Although so far, the research on language ontology and sociolinguistics of Pumi language has an increasing trend (Ying, 2013). Pumi language is still one of the Chinese minority languages with very few studies. Its language vitality research is very fragmented, which often focus on one or very few limited linguistic factors to explore, so lacks a very comprehensive evaluation (Qingxia & Weidong, 1993; Weidong, 1996; Yan & Jialin, 2008; Yan, 2011).

Assessing the vitality of endangered language is a prerequisite for the protection of endangered languages (Dorian, 1992; Dixon, 1997), which defines the degree of language survival. To evaluate the languages, many language vitality assessment models with different standard have been proposed. Among them, some models focus on qualitative analysis (Brenzinger et al., 2003), and the others carry out the quantitative analysis (Lewis et al., 2010; Lee & Van Way 2014). The previous research for language vitality assessment has insufficient in terms of either data timeliness, the perspective of analysis, or methodological versatility, and in particular, these methods did not take into account some of China's local special national conditions, especially in the complex situation of Chinese minority languages, and thus they cannot conduct a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the minority languages in China. Therefore, the paper will explore the particular factors which relevant to Pumi language's endangerment to propose a more comprehensive and accurate model for assessing the vitality of Pumi language.

2. Data information

The investigation was carried out among Pumi people of the Lanping town in Yunnan Province, China respectively in December of 2016 and in December of 2017 (Figure 1). In the case of the lack of investigation partners, harsh objective conditions and limited time, the survey finally received a total of 130 questionnaires and 12 interviews from 7 representative villages, which respectively are Shangshuifeng Village, Luoguqing Village, Dagumei Village, Ahuoji Village, Yushichang Village, Guadeng Village, and Xiagaoping Village. Among these seven villages, Luoguqing Village and Xiagaoping Village are our first investigated region, and the other five villages are the second. The sample contains enough variety to judge it as a representative sample of the populations of the two villages. In the interview, the author emphatically visited 12 Pumi people, including village heads, civil servants, school teachers, reporters and Pumi culture heritage workers. They gave the comprehensive introductions regarding the Pumi language situation.

3. Research method

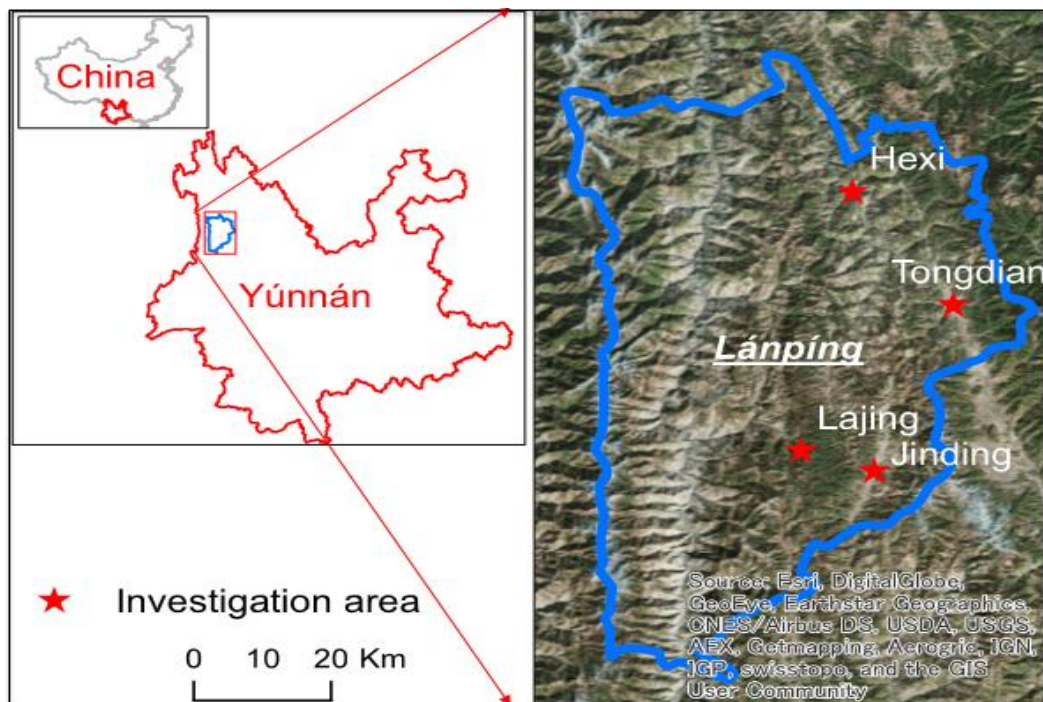


Figure 1. Location of Lanping County and four counties of identified Pumi villages

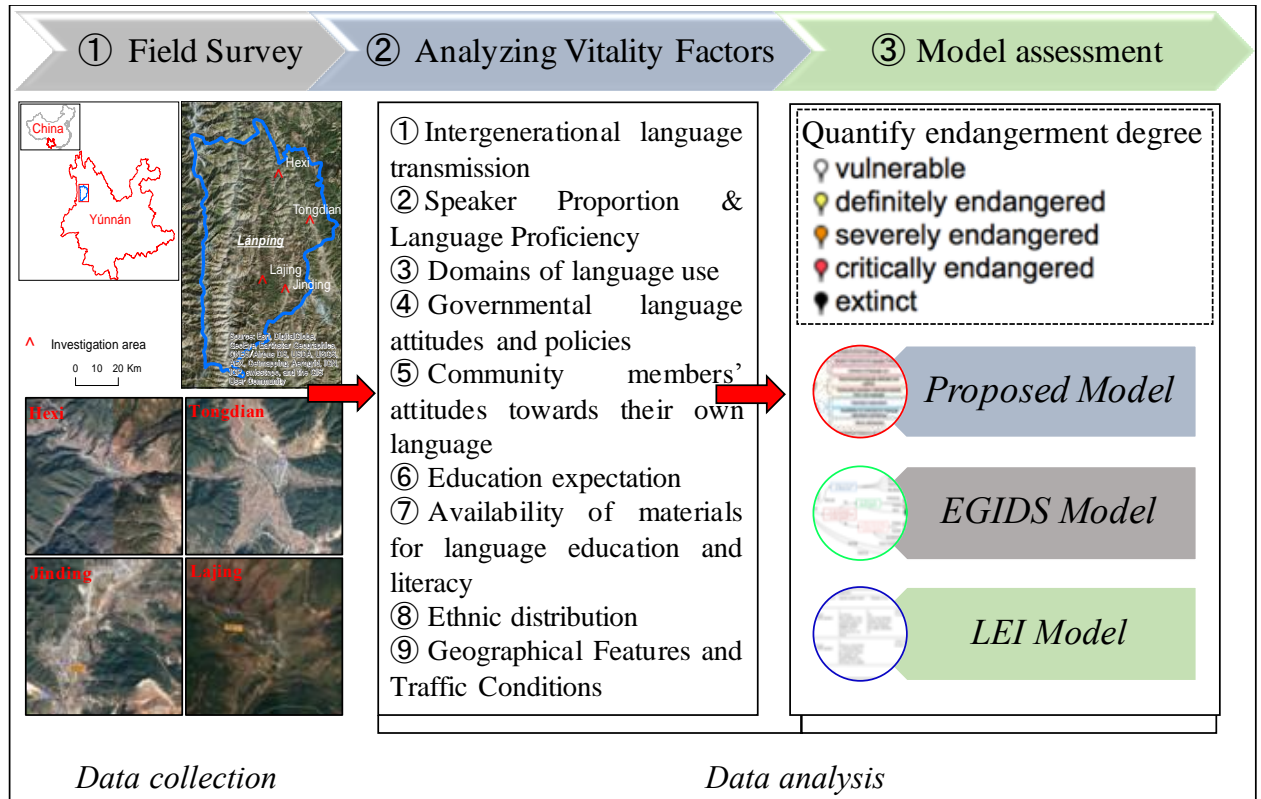


Figure 2. Flowchart of language vitality language vitality evaluation framework

The Flowchart of language vitality assessment framework is shown in Fig 2. The new language vitality assessment method was derived from a series of sociological factors and sociolinguistic factors related to the language endangerment based on latest fieldwork data in Pumi community of Yunnan province, China. First, we carried out the field investigation in Pumi community of Yunnan province, China for gathering the questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires and interviews focus on 9 factors that related to the endangerment of language, they are 1) Intergenerational language transmission, 2) Speaker Proportion & Language Proficiency, 3) Domains of language use, 4) Governmental language attitudes and policies, 5) Community members' attitudes towards their own language, 6) Education expectation, 7) Availability of materials for language education and literacy, 8) Ethnic distribution, 9) Geographical Features and Traffic Conditions. Secondly, these nine factors were analyzed and were categorized as quantitative level based on the proposed criteria, all the level of the nine factors were comprehensively considered to reach the final endangerment level of the language. Finally, the vitality assessment result obtained by the new language vitality assessment method was compared and analyzed with that of EGIDS (Lewis & Simons, 2010), and LEI (Lee & Van Way,

2016). Throughout the process, the Literature Research Method, Field Investigation Method, Statistical Analysis Method and Comparative Analysis Method were mainly used.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on analysis of related questionnaires and interviews, we found that in the EGIDS model, the vitality of Pumi language is at the stage of written level, which represents that the language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community. This conclusion is inconsistent with the fact that there is no character in the Pumi language. While the LEI model indicates that Pumi language is endangered, it seriously overestimates the endangerment degree of the Pumi language, because there is still a large proportion of Pumi people who can use Pumi language proficiently. However, the proposed language vitality assessment method not only shows the vitality of Pumi language is mainly vulnerable but also helps us to understand the complicated situation of the Pumi language more comprehensively and helps predict a future trend, which is useful for the government countermeasures. In addition, the vitality factor analysis indicated the following results: 1) All of the factors related to the Pumi language usage presents a state of polarization and the overall level is not optimistic. Also, the external protection from geographic seclusion and occlusion will become more and more vulnerable. 2) There is a significant relationship between age and language vitality, and the speakers' language environment greatly influences this difference. 3) The current local people have the strong will to protect and inherit their native language, which is quite different from the previous research. 4) Language policy is a very important factor that influences speaker's language use and language attitude. Currently, the local government had promoted the publicity of language preservation, and this action played an important role in awakening the passion of the Pumi people to learn their language.

All in all, the Pumi language vitality is not as serious as the previous literature and there is the potential for recovery, but it also faces many difficult problems that urgently need to be solved. Therefore, in the current condition of Pumi language, we believe that the protection and revitalization of the Pumi language is a long and arduous task that requires the efforts of all the Pumi people and the government.

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